

## 16.3 Techniques for Writing: Writing Topic Sentences for Paragraphs

A **paragraph** is a sequence of sentences that cooperate in supporting one main point. Sometimes that point is so obvious that it doesn't need to be stated, but often a paragraph begins with a **topic sentence** that states the main point directly. Before you can write a topic sentence, you must decide what you want to say and what you don't want to say in your paragraph. In other words, you must first explore your starting topic and then select your limited topic. The next step is to make a statement about the limited topic. Keep these points in mind:

1. A starting topic is usually broad, stimulating many ideas.
2. A limited topic is narrow, connecting a few selected ideas.
3. A topic sentence makes a statement about the limited topic.

For example, study this progression:

- **Starting topic:** Football
- **Limited topic:** The role that football has played in my education
- **Topic sentence:** If it hadn't been for football, I might never have taken school seriously.

**Note:** A topic sentence is always a complete sentence expressing an idea about the limited topic. It is not a title (*What football means to me*), or an explanation of the writer's plan (*I am going to tell you about the role football played in my education.*) The more clearly it focuses the reader's attention on the points covered by the paragraph that the writer wants to make, the better.

**Exercise A:** For each limited topic below, select the two items that could serve as topic sentences.

**Limited topic:** how to train a cat.

1. This paragraph is about how to train a cat.
2. Before a cat learns anything, it first teaches its owner a lesson in humility.
3. Everything you wouldn't have thought to ask about training a cat.
4. Training a cat takes physical stamina.
5. Animal training is a complicated subject.

**Limited topic:** changes in patients as they settle into convalescent homes

1. Americans are learning how to grow old gracefully.
2. The outside world seems to shrink when seen through the window of a convalescent home.
3. Closing up a home and moving to a small room can make even an extrovert turn inward.

4. It is important to look at the changes in patients' attitudes as they settle into convalescent homes.
5. The increasing delight in daily conversation as patients become accustomed to life in a convalescent home.

**Limited topic:** scuba diving

1. The excitement of scuba diving.
2. My childhood fascination with scuba diving.
3. It is very interesting to experience scuba diving.
4. The sport of scuba diving has always excited me.
5. Since I was a child, I've been fascinated by scuba diving.



Notice that choosing a topic sentence helps to focus the topic still further. Using the same cluster of ideas, the student writing about the role football played in his education could have chosen one of these several topic sentences instead:

- a. My high school football coach transformed a sport into a powerful mental discipline.
- b. The lessons I learned from playing high school football prepared me for the challenges of college.
- c. If it hadn't been for football, I might never have taken school seriously.

Each sentence declares a slightly different role that football played in this student's education and alerts the reader to a different focus in the paragraph. Therefore, the topic sentence acts as a tool for organizing the rest of the paragraph.

**Exercise B:** Below are three sets of notes for developing the topic, *the role football played in my education*. For each one, select which topic sentence will fit the completed paragraph. Choose a, b, or c from the list above.

1. concentration to learn plays  
discipline to follow through  
flexibility when plan fails  
college classes painful at first  
college pressure like my JV year in HS
2. distractions from high school—social life, job, being cool  
best friends dropped out  
team solidarity, support, tutoring

State Championship goal, whole school cared  
coach insisted on better than C average

3. coach's weird warm-up exercises  
visualizing ways to overcome hardship  
insistence on accuracy  
team meditations  
application of problem-solving tricks in daily life



**Apply this technique to your writing:** Study a limited topic you have chosen as a result of freewriting or clustering on a leisure time activity. What statement can you make about that topic? Write a topic sentence that could introduce a paragraph on that limited topic. Trade sentences with another student, and rewrite each other's sentences to explore different ways of focusing on the topic.